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AUTHOR Chan, Michele M.
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ABSTRACT

Although benefits and problems in collaborative learning, as well as techniques for facilitating it, have been extensively discussed in recent publications on composition teaching, few detailed descriptions of actual classroom uses of collaborative learning have been published. In an innovative one-term writing course, taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, organized around collaborative learning, students work in small groups on tasks they choose from a corpus of materials. Teachers serve as consultants, rather than authority figures or lecturers. The course design makes it possible to offer a valuable learning experience to students with many different backgrounds, interests and levels of ability. Although the students are advanced English as a Second Language writers, the overall design could be applied in any setting, with only the students' tasks being different. Tasks assigned demonstrate a focus on learning by doing, discussing, and questioning--a focus necessary for true collaborative, student-centered learning to occur. Even though problems with collaborative learning arise, they can be solved more easily with this course design. Students not only learn to write better from a collaborative writing course, but they also enjoy the process. They develop confidence in themselves and come away with a self-motivated attitude toward learning that carries over into other courses and into their whole lives. (Seven figures are included, and 15 references are appended.) (RAE)

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ABSTRACT

LEARNING BY DOING, DISCUSSING AND QUESTIONING:
A COLLABORATIVE WRITING COURSE

Although benefits and problems in collaborative learning, as well as techniques for facilitating it, have been extensively discussed in recent publications on composition teaching, few detailed descriptions of actual classroom uses of collaborative learning have been published. Thus, this paper describes an innovative writing course organized around collaborative learning. In this one-term course, taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, students work in small groups on tasks they choose from a corpus of materials. Teachers are consultants, rather than authority figures or lecturers.

The course design, which is described in detail, makes it possible to offer a valuable course to students with many different backgrounds, interests and levels of ability. Thus, although the students are advanced ESL writers, the overall design could be applied in any setting, with only the students' tasks being different. In this paper samples of tasks are given, demonstrating yet another feature of the course - a focus on learning by doing, discussing, and questioning - a focus necessary for true collaborative, student-centered learning to occur. These and other theoretical assumptions behind the course design are mentioned, and benefits, problems, methods of evaluation, and student response are discussed in detail.

Michele M. Chan
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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LEARNING BY DOING, DISCUSSING AND QUESTIONING

A COLLABORATIVE WRITING COURSE

Michele M. Chan

"How we teach is what we teach," says Trimbur.

To teach writing through collaborative learning is to provide opportunities for students to write as members of communities. What is being taught through asking students to learn to write collaboratively is writing as a social act of making meaning.

In this presentation I do not plan to focus on a discussion of principles of collaborative learning and how these are related to the teaching of ESL writers. I will leave that to my fellow presentors. Instead I would like to describe an innovative course based on collaborative learning, that I designed and offered to students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. That the students are non-native speakers of English is not what is exciting about the course. I am excited about the possibilities the course design offers for applying principles of collaborative learning in many diverse settings, with diverse students.

In fact the diversity of the students was what led me to design the course in 1982. Trimbur, in discussing the history of collaborative learning, points to the diversity of students entering college in the early 70's as a factor in the development of collaborative learning. The great diversity in the needs of Chinese University students in terms of ability, age and background, and academic discipline was a problem I was trying to solve. It seemed impossible to design a writing course that would meet the

diverse needs of these students:

- students from 1st - 4th year of study and thus interested in academic writing (the former) and job application writing and job-related writing (the latter)

- students from different academic disciplines

- students with differing levels of ability - poor to adequate for writing at university level in English-speaking countries

Given that the Chinese University has only about 4500 students, and that English courses are mostly electives, it was not practical to consider designing many different writng courses. Students already had to use one of their few elective choices taking our first and more general writing course, Writing Skills, which would serve as a prerequisite to my new course. Thus, it seemed clear that a way would have to be found to meet the diversity of needs in one writing course, to follow our general Writing Skills course.

I had been doing some reading about the benefits of collaborative learning, some of which I will summarize for you now. (figure 1)

That students, even ESL students, can work together collaboratively was a given. I had seen it happen in Writing Skills, and in fact in that course, they received training and practice in working in groups to work on writing from the idea stage through the final draft. Thus, I was convinced that with careful setting of tasks and careful setting up of the course administratively, collaborative learning could take place.

The title of the new course, Writing Laboratory, was not chosen by me. It may be misleading to composition specialists who are familiar with what we in the field associate with the term "writing lab." Yet in one sense the course shows a similarity to what we mean by the term writing lab in that

BENEFITS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE WRITING CLASS

- Students become active participants, making for more productive and more lasting learning.

- Because they are more responsible for their own learning students are more assertive about what kinds of learning will be more meaningful to them.

- Experience with collaboration can be valuable in students' futures, especially in terms of developing leadership, self-reliance, and ability to work with others.

- Students learn from each other: one student's weakness is another student's strength.

- Students gain a sense of authority over their own writing, leading to greater motivation to write.

- Students learn to assess their own writing more effectively through giving feedback and responses to the writing of classmates.

- More responses/sources of feedback (as opposed to teacher feedback and response only) increase the amount of imput about their own writing students can receive.

- Students get a sense of writing for a real audience.

- Students support each other through difficult points in the writing process.

Figure 1

the course is meant to be one that meets the needs of individual students, albeit through group interaction.

Another central assumption of the course is that writing is best learned through engaging in writing. Not only is this a sound assumption in general, but it makes sense for these non-native speakers of English who in previous courses had often been passive learners about language rather than users of the language, resulting in inability to use the language effectively. Thus, tasks for collaborative group work would have to be designed so that students could learn to write through writing, making use of skills they already possessed, and that students could work without constant teacher presence,.

This last criteria for development of tasks, that students be able to work independently of teachers, derives not only from principles of collaborative learning, but from administrative constraints. In order to design a course that would attract students with diverse needs and diverse time-tables, it would be necessary to allow small groups to choose meeting times that would suit them. Yet even if it were desirable, teachers could not possibly take the 12-15 students in one "section" of a course, break them into 4-5 groups, all meeting at different times, and then be involved in all the group meetings. That would work out to 12-15 hours per week of teacher presence in class for a three credit class which would be only one of four sections a teacher would have to teach. Thus, for both pedagogical and administrative reasons, teachers spend only 10-15 minutes with students for each hour the groups meet. Because of the difficulty of getting students together, no whole class session is ever held.

A description of how the course proceeds on a day to day basis will make this clearer, but before getting to that here is a short summary of some of the roles of the teacher in this course. (figure 2)

THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN A COLLABORATIVE WRITING COURSE

- to facilitate group work

- to plan and structure classroom activities
  - setting time limits
  - forming groups or seeing that they are formed
  - managing physical space and time

- to set tasks

- to teach students to work collaboratively

- to work out problems that may arise, or help students to do so

- to evaluate students (often in conjunction with student self-evaluation and student peer-evaluation)

- to answer questions or help students find answers

- to know when to intervene and when to stand aloof and let students work

- to create a supportive environment in which trust and committment can flourish

- to model appropriate behaviors/set standards (or guide students to set standards) for work

- to ask questions and challenge students to do their best

Figure 2

The course works like this. The course is "advertised" in all sections of the prerequisite: Writing Skills. The advertisement is important, as it is designed to attract students to the course by piquing their curiosity, as well as to warn them that this course will be different from any course they've ever had before and that they will be expected to play a more active role. Here is the handout used as an advertisement for the course. (Figure 3)

Having decided that they would like to accept the challenge, on registration day students fill out a questionnaire which asks such things as how active they tend to be in groups, how they think their writing compares to that of other students, and most importantly, which of the seven units they wish to work on. Based on this information, teachers will form groups of 3-5 students set up meeting times with the groups, and see that every student has the appropriate learning materials.

The first week of work for every one of the units, whether it be a unit of more basic language work, such as WORD USE and STYLING SENTENCES, or a unit covering a specific type of writing (all the others), will be fun activities and discussion questions designed to help students get to know and trust one another and to introduce the contents of the unit. (Figure 4)

Students are also asked to discuss whether or not they want to appoint a leader, and if so what that person's responsibilities will be. They talk about the importance of attendance at every meeting, or cancelling meetings and re-scheduling, since in such small groups, each person's imput is needed. Students are also asked to discuss whether or not they can handle learning situations in which no right answer exists or in which the teacher is not present to immediately straighten out any problems or answer questions.

THE WRITING LABORATORY CHALLENGE

Please mark the following statements with either TRUE or FALSE:

_____It should be the teacher who determines what students in a course study and the pace at which they study.

_____The teacher is the most qualified person to evaluate students' performance.

_____It is mainly the teacher's responsibility to see that students learn.

_____If there were no external pressure in the form of grades, exams, and classroom attendance-taking, few students would be motivated to study or attend class.

Please put a tick (✓) in the boxes of the statements that apply to you:

☐ I like to analyze things and ask questions.

☐ I want to know <u>why</u> I should learn something and how it fits in with other things I know.

☐ I am self-motivated about studying.

☐ Teacher evaluation of me is less important to me than my own assessment of myself and how much I've learned.

☐ I tend to be a leader or active participant in small group situations.

If in the first section you answered TRUE in more than one case or in the second you did not put any ticks, you need not read this handout any further. However, those of you who thought that many of the statements in the first section were FALSE, and put ticks in the boxes of the second section, should read on to find out about ELT 442, <u>Writing Laboratory</u>.

This course is an extension of the Writing Skills course in that you will be given the opportunity to apply the process and techniques learned in Writing Skills to various more specific types of writing. At this time there are seven units, from which you can choose two, to work on in small groups. These are the units: LETTER WRITING, ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING, STORY WRITING, POETRY WRITING, JOB PREPARATION, STYLING SENTENCES, and WORD USE. There will be no formal class meetings; instead you will arrange with the members of your small groups to meet three hours per week. The role of the teacher in this course is that of a consultant or resource person. You and your group members will be responsible for learning and helping one another.

Figure 3

First Impressions (Before this meeting please read the first two chapters in For First Job Seekers.)

At this point you probably do not know the members of your group very well yet. The following exercise will help you to get to know each other better and will also give each of you some interesting things to think about regarding the first impression you make on people. (Remember that at job interviews you will be judged in part on the impression you make on interviewers who will spend only a short time talking with you.)

WRITE - Answer these questions about each of your group members. You are not to ask them any questions, as the point of this exercise is to explore first impressions. Just guess and write based on what you can see of them. Use a separate piece of paper for each person.

1) What kind of career is this person planning on?
   What makes you think so?

2) What qualities does this person have that make him or her suitable for this career?
   How can you tell?

3) What other things do you notice about this person?

After you have finished writing, exchange papers and read what the others have written about you. Each of you can then take a couple of minutes to tell the group whether their first impressions were correct of not and why.

WRITE - What have you learned about how others see you? Are there any changes that you'd like to make? (Note: this exercise can be done at home if there is not time enough in class. Though you should think about it carefully and write as well as you can, and though you must turn this in, it need not be read by your teacher if you'd like it kept confidential. Simply put three stars (***) on the top of the page and the teacher will not read it.)

Figure 4

Finally, students begin the work of the unit, with the teacher usually appearing only the last 10-15 minutes of each of the meetings. The work varies, depending on the topic, but here are a few examples of what they may be doing. In the WORD USE unit, students are asked to collect unfamiliar words they encounter in their studies or pleasure reading. They write 50 of these in a notebook, through the 1/2 term of the unit, define them, and use them in original sentences. Once every week they teach each other 3-5 of their words, stressing how words are used in contexts, and featuring guessing. In the STYLING SENTENCES unit, one which is designed for more "basic" work, students bring in completed sentence combining exercises which they share and evaluate for correctness, clarity, and style. They also write a page weekly which they carefully edit for grammatical mistakes. This is read by the teacher, who identifies one or two major types of mistakes, discusses them with the students, and gives an assignment designed to get the student to try to use that grammatical structure correctly. For example, a student having problems with past perfect verb tense might be asked to write about what he or she would have done had he or she not be admitted to the university.

Description of the kinds of work in the previous units probably sounds like typical intermediate ESL work. Sometimes it is, but sometimes it is considerably more challenging, as in this excerpt from an exercise on connotation in the WORD USE Unit which I will share with you: (Figure 5)

Other units have students write letters, stories, poems, argumentative essays, or job application letters, while discussing what good samples of each of these should look like. In the STORY WRITING and POETRY WRITING units students also read and discuss stories and poetry, some provided by the teacher, and some provided by the group members.

4. What is the difference between these words?

hope wish anticipate await dream expect foresee

5. Rank these from least to greatest:

myriad a profusion several many some a score a few

6. Do you know what all these synonyms for the word "think" mean?

deliberate meditate muse ponder reason reflect ruminate

7. Rank these in order of sadness:

sad blue dejected depressed despondent disconsolate melancholy unhappy gloomy grief-stricken .

8. Sometimes it's not polite to describe someone as "fat" or "skinny." What more polite words could you use?

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

Figure 5

In addition to functioning as readers of each other's writing and co-learners of what good writing of a specific type is, students in Writing Lab also play a key role in evaluating each other for a term grade. An evaluation form is provided, early in the term, so that students know what is expected and can think about it as they go along. They will use the evaluation form to evaluate both themselves and their group members. Self-evaluation, an average of group members' evaluation, and teacher-evaluation each count 1/3 toward the grade for a unit. The grades for the two units are then averaged together for the term grade. The evaluation form looks like this: (Figure 6)

This grading sheet may seem rather lopsided in that quality of work is only one out of the seven aspects on which students rate themselves and classmates. Two out of seven relate to effort, and four out of seven concern the dynamics of the group. However, this is deliberate, since I believe that maximum effort will result in maximum learning. Also, 1/3 of the overall grade comes from the teacher's evaluation of students' work.

In practice, this form of evaluation works out fairly well, though there have been problems with students either awarding maximum points to all members and/or very low grades to all. Sometimes it also happens that students are too humble about their own work. I teasingly urge them to behave not like Chinese but like Americans and be willing to assert their quality! I think that not using letter grades takes away some of the problems students might have about judging themselves and one another, though they are aware of how the points will turn into letter grades.

There are other problems involved in this collaborative writing course, ones that I will just warn you about and mention briefly how we have tried to counter them. (Figure 7)

Writing Lab - Form for Self and Group Member Evaluation

Your Name:_____

Name of the unit you are working on:_____

Name of group member being evaluated:_____
(If this is a self-evaluation, please leave this space blank.)

Please rank your self/group member in the following areas by circling the one that applies:

	4	3	2	1
effort in doing the exercises	maximum	good	adequate	poor
effort in doing the project	maximum	good	adequate	poor
quality of the project	outstanding	good	fair	poor
frequency of coming to class with work prepared	always	usually	sometimes	never
consideration for group members (includes coming to class on time, calling ahead if late or unable to attend, willingness to help	always	usually	sometimes	never
participation in group work (discussing, sharing work, making suggestions, encouraging others)	outstanding	good	fair	poor
facilitating group work (leading discussion, keeping the group on relevent matters, suggesting procedures, setting time limits contacting teacher, etc.)	always	usually	sometimes	never

TOTAL POINTS_____

28-26 = A
25 = A-
24 = B+
23-19 = B
18 = B-
17 = C+
16-12 = C
11-10 = C-
9-5 = D

Self Evaluation

_____

Group Members Grades _____+_____+_____+_____+_____ =_____

Teacher's Grades: project_____+ exercises_____ =_____

UNIT GRADE=_____

Figure 6

SOME PROBLEMS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

- Individual students and sometimes groups of students are unwilling to assume authority for their own learning.

- Some students and teachers may feel that collaborative learning, especially for ESL students, is a case of "the blind leading the blind."

- Students may get off the subject/task at hand when the teacher is not present.

- Some students have trouble in collaborative learning:
    - the student who dominates group activity
    - the student who is passive
    - the student who is often absent or late
    - the student who distracts
    - the student who is hurtfully critical

Figure 7

In my experience it is the first problem, that of students not being willing or able to assume authority for their own work, that is the most troublesome, especially in a context such as that in Hong Kong where students have for years been mostly passive receivers of "facts" from teachers as authority figures. Students in such settings come to trust neither themselves nor their classmates as sources of learning.

This problem has no easy answer. Reassurance and discussion with students helps, especially when teachers explain that language learning is an area in which practice in language use is as important or more so than learning a body of "facts." Not only that, but with regard to writing, especially, how an audience receives a piece of writing is the most important judge of its effectiveness. Thus, classmates, as members of the audience for writing, are qualified to speak on how successful such writing is and how it might be made even more so.

Sometimes, when explanations and demonstrations fail, teachers must gently withdraw and leave students to struggle with the task of coming to rely on their own authority and that of their classmates. Through working together, students, I have found, are able to actively assume authority in a collaborative writing course.

The second problem, a question of whether or not collaborative learning is a case of the blind leading the blind, can be of great concern to teachers. However, first of all, students do bring more in the way of experience and ability than they may realize. Teachers can help to draw out this knowledge and can remind students that they can be helpful members of an audience even if they are not yet themselves proficient writers. Teachers can also provide structures that will assist students, such as the task and formal conventions expected. Both students and teachers should

keep in mind that collaborative learning does not imply that teachers totally abandon students. As discussed earlier, teachers structuring their classrooms around collaborative learning play an active role in managing the classroom, setting appropriate tasks, answering questions, modelling behavior, and evaluating work.

The other problems mentioned, those of students getting off the task at hand and other undesirable student behavior, while potentially disruptive, can be worked out through management of group times, members, and so on, and and through discussion with participants. In any case, the benefits of collaborative learning to both students and teachers greatly outweigh the problems.

To conclude this description of a course based on collaborative learning, I'd just like to state that it has been my experience that students not only learn to write better from such a course, but they also enjoy the process. They develop confidence in themselves and come away with a self-motivated attitude toward learning that carries over into other courses and into their whole lives.

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